

Sermon September 5, 2021 Spirituality of the Cross XIII Conclusion

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, we made it to the end of this summer series on the unusual ways God works in our lives, the church, and the world. Hopefully we have a greater knowledge and more importantly a greater appreciation for how God works and doesn't work.

In most cases, God works in the way that is the opposite of what we would expect. The ultimate example of this is the cross itself. How did God defeat the condemning power of Satan and all demonic beings? By riding in with his entire company of angels, flaming swords bared? Nope. Jesus defeated sin, death, and Satan by means of his suffering and death. If you can't come to terms with this eternal truth, you might as well stop right there, because nothing else in the workings of God will make much sense either.

How often God comes across as unjust, unloving, mean, distant, aloof, silent, and cold. From the way we naturally see things, this is the God of the Bible. Most people walk away from this God wagging their heads. Unlike them, we have been called into the mysteries of God. We have been given, as Jesus says, the knowledge of the kingdom – of the reign and rule of Jesus Christ. The first will be last, and the last will be first. If anyone wants to save his life, he must first lose his life by denying himself, taking up his cross, and becoming a disciple of Jesus.

When we ask the question, "What must I do to be saved?" we are told to give up even trying to be saved, admit there is indeed absolutely nothing we are able to do to save ourselves, and confess to the darkness and depravity that lies within us, and call and fall upon the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. We imagine that when we begin our walk with God, everything will go well with us. We will meet the perfect person, have a great job, have beautiful, obedient children, and live a long and happy life in perfect health. All the while, God is trying to tell us that his power is made perfect in weakness. But we aren't listening. We don't want loss, misfortune, sickness, disaster, poverty, or any other kind of trouble in our lives. We see it as God's blessing when our life goes well. When things go badly, we feel God has abandoned us. This is how everybody feels.

But we have been brought into a life lived under Jesus' cross. In our baptism we have been reborn into the spirituality of the cross. There is no other genuine, Biblical, helpful, or relevant way to view our life in Christ, or our life at all. It is a blind fool's errand to seek happiness through today's popular spirituality methods or to seek happiness in pleasure. To live oblivious to the coming judgement is not safe, even though for a while we may have a sense of inner peace. To live in pleasure will disappoint more than satisfy, like when the new chef changes your favorite restaurant's recipe for chicken parmigiana. You go expecting enjoyment, but the taste leaves you wanting, and you return home dissatisfied. Such is life.

We do find all the answers in Jesus. Last week when the Vicar and I were in St. Louis, the head of the deaconess department told us that one of the most common questions she got from women in her work as a deaconess was if Jesus was really God. Yes, Jesus is really God. In him everything really sort of comes together for us. Is there a spiritual realm? Yes. Jesus is spirit. Is the physical/material realm somehow less important than the spiritual realm? Is the flesh evil? Absolutely not. Jesus took upon himself human nature and human flesh. It is part of him eternally. Jesus also makes the physical part of our lives holy, since he is one of us now, and in our baptism we have become one with him.

This sets the tone for the rest of our lives. Jesus is spirit, and we have every spiritual strength and blessing available to us in him. Jesus is human, and most of what he experienced as human is shared with us – typical childhood with brothers and sisters. Imperfect parents. The loss of his father. Physical labor and tons of walking. Heat, cold, hunger, thirst, frustration, loneliness, opposition, hatred, abuse, flogging, beating, and crucifixion. We can look forward to all of that and more as we walk with Jesus. This is true. It is as God says – his power is made perfect in weakness. This is also why Martin Luther always pointed out the church's theology is centered in the cross and why he always said, "The cross alone is our theology." This makes everything as real as it can get for us, because we are surrounded and submerged in suffering and pain personally and in society.

When we are assured that Jesus is also a part of that, and because of his humanity he is right there with us, feeling and experiencing everything just as we are, we are no longer going it alone. We have a companion, faithful and true. The worse it gets, the closer he draws near, because there is less and less of our own

busyness and self-absorption to stand in the way. All our outer layers get peeled away and we are fully exposed to the presence of Jesus Christ.

In this series I have tried to cover how this effect is also found in the ordinary-ness of the Bible, the worship life of the church, in society and government, and in the (through the eyes of the world) unremarkable lives to which God has called us. We are not rich, powerful, or famous. We are not especially handsome or beautiful. We are not particularly smart or ingenious. We haven't changed the world. We are quite ordinary. And that's OK, because ordinary people are exactly the ones God uses to accomplish his purposes in the church and in the world.

When Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth after he began to teach, his own townspeople could not accept him. "Is this not Jesus?" they asked. "Joseph's son – the carpenter? Is not his mother here with us as well as his brothers and sisters?" Even though Jesus was taking their understanding of God to new heights never before reached, they couldn't accept how God could use such an ordinary person as Jesus. We understand that beneath the shell, Jesus was not so run of the mill! And neither are we. Unlike Jesus, we really are ordinary typical people. But God's power is made perfect in our weakness, and we pray that God would indeed make his power perfect in us!

God bless you as you find help and hope in God living in the spirituality of the cross. Amen.